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SUBJECT: Media Reaction: Barzani Says Americans Will Not Stay Forever in Iraq

This is an Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) cable.

1. (U) SUMMARY: Speaking in everyday language directly to the Kurdish people, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Massoud Barzani made a statement to a special session of the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA) on December 26 in which he downplayed the significance of the Iraq Study Group report, but said that Americans "will not stay forever" in Iraq. Without the U. S. acting as an intermediary, Barzani warned, there could be attempts to delay or sideline the Constitutional referendum on Kirkuk. Any such move would lead to "a disaster," and he intimated the Kurds might be required to take up arms to defend Kirkuk. He said that in his recent trip to Baghdad he had reached an agreement with the Iraqi central government on budget and oil revenue sharing. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) KDP and PUK media outlets covered the statement of KRG President Massoud Barzani to a special session of the Kurdistan National Assembly on December 26. In his statement Barzani downplayed the importance of the Iraq Study Group report citing a phone call with President Bush and a meeting with Senators Joseph Lieberman and John McCain during his recent trip to Baghdad. However, he also foreshadowed the eventual withdrawal of U. S. troops from Iraq. He said:

-- "I spoke with President Bush by telephone and he understands the sadness of the Kurdish people at this report. He told me this report is just like any other report and the final decision is up to him alone. President Bush also rejects any steps outside the Iraqi Constitution."

-- "I met members of the U. S. Congress from both the Democratic and Republican sides. They told me that neither the Congress nor the U. S. government is committed to the report. They said they appreciate what the Kurdish people have achieved in recent years and feel an ethical commitment to the Kurds."

-- "But how long will the Americans stay? They will not stay here forever. If they feel there is no solution (to the ethnic violence in the south) they will pull out and we will be alone."

3. (U) Without the U. S. acting as an intermediary, Barzani warned there could be attempts to delay or sideline the Constitutional referendum on Kirkuk. He called on neighboring countries to stop political interference that is destabilizing the situation in Kirkuk and Mosul and suggested Kurds might be called upon to take up arms in defense of Kirkuk. He said:

-- "The Kurdish people have sacrificed a lot to secure a better future and achieve the rights that are guaranteed in the Iraqi Constitution. We do not accept any move to circumvent the Constitutional process."

-- "Neighboring countries are interfering in Iraqi sovereignty by smuggling groups of mercenaries, terrorists, and former Baathists, with the goal of drawing the Kurds into a national civil war. Already more than 2000 Kurds have been killed in Kirkuk, Mosul, and Diyala, and more than 3000 Kurdish families have been forced out of Mosul because of this war."

-- "Any postponement or modification to the implementation of Article 140 of the Constitution will lead to a disaster."

-- "We will struggle against any tribe that interferes with the Constitution, and the victory will be for us."

¶4. (U) Barzani said he supports the movement to form a new coalition to marginalize militia leaders in Baghdad, but warned against factions in the government who are not committed to national reconciliation. He promised that Peshmerga forces would not be sent to protect Baghdad in the context of sectarian violence. He said:

-- "We (the Kurds) live inside the framework of Iraq and are part of this state. Any deterioration in the situation in the rest of Iraq will have a negative impact on the situation here."

-- "There are people who support the government, the parliament and the political process on the surface. However, in practice, they side with the terrorists and militias which carry out killings every day."

-- "We agreed (Kurdish and Iraqi officials) in Baghdad that we need a national coalition to handle the security situation in Iraq."

-- "We will form coalitions with any group that believes in the Constitution, democracy, federalism, coexistence and mutual participation. And we will never be allies with sides that oppose

BAGHDAD 00004758 002 OF 002

these principles, whether they are Shia or Sunni."

-- "The Peshmerga's duty is to protect the democratic regime. However, if they want the Peshmerga to go to Baghdad and become part of the Shia-Sunni conflict, then we would not do that. If the aim is that the Peshmerga is stationed on the streets of Baghdad to become a target for snipers and booby-trapped vehicles, we will not tolerate that."

¶5. Barzani also commented on the success of his visit in reaching accommodation on economic issues:

-- "We have reached an agreement on the budget where 17 per cent of the national budget will be shared with us."

-- "We are close to announcing an agreement for sharing oil revenues in which all parties will get an equal share."

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: Barzani used his statement to downplay the significance of the Iraq Study Group report, a departure from his staunchly negative rhetoric and that of other KRG officials in recent weeks. This suggests that he realizes the government has overplayed its opposition to the report with protests and petition campaigns among students and civil society organizations that have been orchestrated by party officials behind the scenes for international media consumption. He also intimates that the prospect of an eventual withdrawal of U. S. troops from Iraq could bring attempts to delay or sideline the Constitutional referendum on Kirkuk. In this situation, he intimates, the Kurds might be required to take up arms to defend Kirkuk. END COMMENT.